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ABSTRACT

The Southwest Regional Laboratory (SWRL) communication skills lexicon, compiled for use in the development of elementary instruction, is a set of words used by children between kindergarten and sixth grade. Although the lexicon was originally derived from the most comprehensive and up-to-date sources available, the major studies on which the instrument is based were published 20 to 30 years ago. In order to obtain a contemporary set of children's words, a study of new words was undertaken. Words from six sources of new terms were selected by two reviewers. The resulting list was edited independently by eight adults knowledgeable about contemporary children's vocabulary. Terms agreed upon by at least 50% of the editors were retained. The remaining terms were submitted to 166 students from seven sixth-grade classes. Words known by 60% of the responding students constituted a set of 322 new words, which can be categorized as primarily compounds, affixed forms, figures of speech, shortened forms, and foreign loan words. (Author/KS)

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NEW WORDS IN CHILDREN'S VOCABULARY

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The SWRL communication skills lexicon (Rhode and Cronnell, 1977) is a set of more than 10,000 words used by children between kindergarten and sixth grade. This lexicon provides a basic set of words coded with accompanying linguistic data, and is intended for use in curriculum design. This computer-processed data base also furnishes sufficient information for those who wish to investigate the nature of the words that children use.

While there have been several extensive vocabulary studies, each has limitations that restrict its value for this use. Thorndike and Lorge (1944) is based primarily on adult written text, much of which is no longer in common use. Kučera and Francis (1967) is a more recent and representative sample of written text, but it, too, is a study of adult words. Two recent, comprehensive studies of words in elementary textbooks (Carroll, Davies, and Richman, 1971, and Harris and Jacobson, 1972) describe the words that children are expected to read, but not the words that they use.

To help overcome the deficiencies found in individual vocabulary studies, the SWRL lexicon is derived from eight sources that represent the most comprehensive and up-to-date studies of children's word use available. Rigid inclusion-exclusion criteria were applied; these were based on the nature of the sources and on the forms of lexical entries.

However, the major studies of elementary children's speaking and writing vocabularies do not represent current usage. (Rinsland (1945) was based on data collected from children's writings in the spring of 1937--forty years ago. Rinsland, is still the most comprehensive study of children's vocabulary. Murphy and others (1957) is a compilation of seven masters' theses of K-3 oral vocabulary, conducted between 1947 and 1956 at Boston University--twenty to thirty years ago. The more recent studies from which the SWRL lexicon was derived are based on much smaller samplings and are primarily either classroom-oriented (e.g., Jacobs, 1967) or are taken from reading materials (e.g., Durr, 1970). They do not reflect many lexical innovations of the past two or three decades. To supplement this deficiency, SWRL undertook a project to compile a list of terms, relatively new in K-6 vocabulary, derived from a total of six valid compilations. Work was begun in March, 1972, and continued through April, 1974, as additional data became available.

SOURCES

The sources for this study were primarily dictionaries, some of which do not present American English exclusively. None were limited to children's vocabulary.

The first source used (Berg, 1953) represents an effort to collect all lexical items reflecting vocabulary growth and change: neologisms, acronyms, new phrases, new meanings added to old words, etc. The compiler recorded new terms from both oral and written language.

The second source consulted was also a glossary of new words and new word uses (Reifer, 1955). No information was available concerning either the sources for the material or the procedures followed in compiling the dictionary. However, it is a valuable and comprehensive study of relatively new terms.

The third source was a list of "New Words and Phrases" found in *The New York Times encyclopedic almanac 1972* (pp. 428-430). These are also new terms plus new meanings for older terms, and were prepared by the lexicographical staff of The World Publishing Company.

The publication of the 1971 addenda section of *Webster's third new international dictionary* (1961) provided the fourth source. According to the publisher, G. & C. Merriam Company, this list represents words that have become established in the language since 1961.

Berger (1971) conducted a study in which a sample of 10,000 words was taken from the November 20, 1969 edition of *The New York Times*. In a comparison with the Thorndike and Lorge (1944) word count, Berger found 78 words, relatively new in the language, that did not appear at all in the older study. This list of new words was the fifth source.

The Barnhart dictionary of new English since 1963 (1973), with approximately 5000 entries, was the last source used. The new words and phrases were collected from United States, British, and Canadian writing--newspapers, magazines, and books. Terms were judged "new" if they had not appeared in any major standard English dictionary before 1963.

INCLUSION-EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Because of the variances in the sources, inclusion-exclusion criteria were applied. Words were included if the new listed meaning was the only or primary meaning in use by children today, e.g., parka and penicillin. Words were excluded if only the listed meaning was new, and there was another meaning, older but still common. For example, cartridge, referring to a case of film to be loaded into a camera, is relatively new; cartridge, referring to the case for a bullet, is an old meaning, but still common. The word profile, meaning a short biographical sketch, is of fairly recent usage; profile, meaning a side view of a human head, is not new, but is still common. Cartridge and profile were not included as new words. Also excluded were words which were new only in their uses as other parts of speech, not in their forms or meanings, e.g., headline as a verb. Of course, words were included only if they were judged to be known by K-6 American children.

Some words were not included because of their transitory nature or because they are educationally unacceptable. The exclusions were comprised of (1) words--primarily slang--that seem to be changing now, e.g., kook, mooch; (2) words that refer only to fashions and are created at the capricious whim of designers and advertisers, e.g., mini, midi, maxi, pantdress; and (3) words--especially from the drug culture--that might be offensive, or objectionable, e.g., acidhead, barf, bennies, narc.

PROCEDURES

To obtain a set of relatively new words, carefully controlled procedures were followed. First, each source was reviewed by two staff members, who listed only those words in current use by children. The two lists were compared for agreement; those words lacking agreement were reconsidered for inclusion. The two resulting lists from each source were combined.

Next, the combined list of terms from the sources was edited independently by eight SWRL staff members, selected for their knowledge of children's contemporary vocabulary. They were asked to cross out words not currently known by K-6 children. The terms remaining were those that had been agreed upon by at least 50% of the eight staff members.

After all of the available sources had been reviewed and edited, 7% of the remaining terms seemed to be reliably well-known, e.g., ad, ball-point, cheeseburger, drive-in, freeway, jet, quiz, skateboard, smog, spaceship, sweatshirt, teen-ager, T-shirt.

Finally, an additional validation procedure was employed in which the questionable 93% of the terms were divided into five lists of approximately 80 words each. All five lists were sent to each of seven sixth-grade public school classes having students of average ability, and the lists were distributed equally within each class. 166 students participated. Teachers administered the word lists and were instructed to provide help only in reading the words, not in interpreting the meanings. Children circled words that were known and drew lines through words that were not known. The children were allowed only 30 minutes in which to edit the list.

Words circled by 60% of the responding students were included in the lexicon of words known by children in the K-6 range. The validation study netted 293 new words. These, added to the 29 reliably well-known words that were not tested, constitute a set of 322 new words.

CATEGORIES OF NEW WORDS

New terms expand the vocabulary in a variety of ways, but these usually involve a change in meaning and/or form of older words. Figures of speech are probably the most productive source of vocabulary in English. Most figures of speech obtained from this study have become new compounds, e.g., anchorman, bullhorn, hot-rod, turtleneck, whirlybird. However, the lexicon excluded words that only have new meanings and still have older meanings that are in common use; e.g., ceiling and rocket were excluded. This limitation reduced the number of figures of speech.

The most prolific process for creation of new words in this study involved changes in forms of older words. Compounding produced the highest percentage of new terms. Most of these have gone or are going through regular growth stages from two-word phrases to hyphenated forms (often with a change in function) to one-word compounds, e.g., aircondi-tioning, doggie-bag, hardback, high-rise, self-employed. Some of these combined forms are semicompounds--forms having one identifiable free base and one partial or unidentifiable base--e.g., aerosol (with the frequently-used Greek spelling of air + sol(ution)), charbroil (from char(coal) + broil), cheese + (ham)burger), laundromat (from laundr(y) + (aut)omat(ic)).

Another form change used frequently involves shortening of words, e.g., advertisement → ad, African → Afro, delicatessen → deli, liberation → lib, modern → mod. Other form changes that reduce terms are abbreviations, acronyms, and respellings, e.g., A-bomb, Ms., radar, TV.

Changes in the meanings of words occur when prefixes are added, e.g., antipollution, defrost, nonstick, recycle, supermarket. Changes in the functions of words, as from noun to verb, with some shift in meaning, occur when suffixes are added, e.g., choosy, disposable, environmentalist, fluoridate, lighter, radiation.

With increased communication, travel, and population mobility, more and more foreign words are being adopted. At the level of children's vocabulary, many of these are food names, but words like bikini, cassette, Chicano, karate, and snorkel have also been assimilated.

Actual innovations are few. Some onomatopoeic and reduplicative terms are relatively new, e.g., beep, hush-hush, nitty-gritty, superduper. Portmanteau words are not plentiful, but we do find firmly-established new blends like brunch, hassle, and smog in children's speech. Occasionally the births of such neologisms are documented, but often dictionaries indicate that the origins are obscure or unknown. e.g., doodle, dude, jive, pooch, quiz.

CONCLUSION

It would be desirable to know which of the newer words will remain active in the vocabulary. But words reflect life, and life is always changing. Some words listed as relatively new in the sources are already becoming obsolete. For example, carhops came in with drive-ins;

but now drive-ins are replacing carhops with the speakers of intercom systems. Because of this impermanence of language items, the present study tended to be conservative in the selection of terms. The list of 322 terms resulting from this study is representative of the relatively new words that are being used currently by K-6 children.

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Categorized Examples

Figures of speech (mostly compounds):

airlift	crackpot	jackpot
anchorman	deadline	litterbug
bulldoze	fastback	pinpoint
bullhorn	hairdo	streamline
carpool	hangup	turtleneck
corny	hot-rod	whirlybird

Compounds:

airconditioner	drive-in	paperback
airway	dropout	parkway
audio-visual	easy-care	queen-size
ball-point	expressway	round-the-clock
bikeway	face-lifting	scriptwriter
blastoff	fallout	self-employed
body-surf	flashcube	short-term
bypass	freeway	skateboard
cease-fire	freeze-dry	snowmobile
charbroil	hardback	speed-reading
cheeseburger	hatchback	splashdown
cookout	king-size	sweatshirt
custom-made	know-how	test-drive
day-care	moonflight	throwaway
dishwasher	open-circuit	tie-dye
do-it-yourself	open-heart	update
doubleknit	outgoing	waterbed
drip-dry	pantyhose	weight-watcher

Shortened forms:

ed	coke	intercom
Afro	deli	lib
bra	destruct	mod

Abbreviations, acronyms, and respellings:

A-bomb	Ms.	T-shirt
hijack	radar	TV

Prefixed and suffixed:

atomic	documentary	minibike
choosy	environmentalist	monorail
classified	evacuation	nonstick
cordless	fluoridate	recycle
defrost	freaky	re-release
demonstrator	freezer	teen-ager
disadvantaged	lighter	tennies
disposable	microwave	unleaded

Foreign load words:

bikini	chow	mascara
bronc(o)	Chicano	sabotage
cassette	karate	snorkel

Onomatopoeic and reduplicative words:

beep	nitty-gritty	superduper
hush-hush	no-no	walkie-talkie

Portmanteau words:

brunch	hassle	smog

Neologisms and words of obscure origin:

doodle	gremlin	pooch
dude	jive	quiz

This study is reported in greater detail in: Rhode, M. and Cronnell, B. Development of the communication skills lexicon coded with linguistic information. Technical Report, SWRL Educational Research and Development, Los Alamitos, California, 1977.